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A charming "Worth" pays a price for not knowing its value

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Geraldine Plunkett and Marcus Lamb in *Worth*
The Viking Theatre

Worth by Ger Gallagher

Rating: ★★★★★

In *'Worth'*, the latest play by Ger Gallagher, home is a costly sentiment in the heart of Celtic Tiger Ireland, where knowing the price of something is all that really matters. Set during the last six months of 2007 and early 2008, *'Worth'* follows Jenny Lavelle as she adjusts to life living alone after a hip operation and the recent death of her life-long friend Nancy. Her son and aspiring businessman Des, who loves his reputation and money in equal measure, has designs on selling her house before the bottom drops out of the market. But for Jenny, her house is her home and it's not for sale as long as she's still living there. Not interested in being relegated to a Granny flat to the rear of Des' garden, the first step towards the nursing home, Jenny has found a new friend in her new neighbour Paula Harte, a young wife and mother married to one of Ireland's wealthiest men. But for all involved the boom is about to burst and money, or the lack of, will make or break

relationships changing the lives of all in the process. In addressing the plight of those impacted by the property crash, 'Worth' falls short as other plays have certainly dealt with this better. But in the honesty and integrity it brings to its exploration of a capable, but aging, woman wanting to live out her final days at home, despite huge pressure from her family, 'Worth,' shows a beguiling charm and sensitivity that captivates from the outset, built around two sterling performances.

Despite its charm 'Worth' certainly has its fair share of problems. With its elderly lady adrift from her family finding solace in the company of a stranger, 'Worth' strongly echoes 'Driving Miss Daisy' in several respects. Structurally, Gallagher's script feels more like a screenplay for a television soap or radio play, with one talking head, episodic scene following another. Dramatically it's all quite pedestrian for the most part, with very little really at stake. Des walks in, switches off the blaring radio, chats with Mum then leaves. Paula walks in, often bearing gifts, chats with Jenny then leaves. Repeat indefinitely with a few slight modifications towards the end and that's essentially it. Dialogue is clichéd and exposition heavy, and its secrets can be spotted a mile off. When something unexpected occurs, such as events surrounding Jenny in the final scene, it can feel forced and contrived. Thankfully director Caroline Fitzgerald manages to negotiate these difficulties with great deftness, and the resulting production is deeply engaging as a result. Set design by Michelle Barry is excellent, with Barry's retro kitchen almost serving as a fifth character.

Simon Toal as the family solicitor, Declan, turns in a finely nuanced performance. Jenn McGuirk as the neighbourly Paula, a woman with secrets desperately in need of a friend, was a little hit and miss at times, seeming to do too much in places, at others hitting the perfect note. Marcus Lamb as Des, a son conflicted by his love of mother and money, was outstanding throughout and gave 'Worth' a centering and energy it badly needed. As did Geraldine Plunkett as Jenny, a woman raging against the dying of the light, who was a sheer delight, with her final moments with McGuirk being heartbreakingly moving.

Like Deirdre Kinahan's excellent 'Halycon Days' the theme of ageing is handled with wonderful sensitivity and 'Worth' will certainly appeal to an older audience. Indeed, there's a sense that there's a terrific story here trying to get out from under all the Celtic Tiger distractions, with Lamb and Plunkett hinting at so much more below the surface. One hopes Gallagher might take a second glance for 'Worth,' despite not being all it might have been, is a touching, honest portrayal of a woman in decline, with some excellent performances that make it well worth going to see.

'Worth' by Ger Gallagher, produced by Dolmen Productions, runs at The Viking Theatre, Clontarf until April 9th

Show begin 8.00 p.m.

For further information, visit The Viking Theatre

Chris O'Rourke



Theatre Examiner

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